

Catching bad bugs can make for good work



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Word travels fast when a "site-bug" appears, and this particular case proved to be fascinating.

What's a site-bug you ask? It's the word I use to describe a transaction-oriented Web site that features a glaring programming error in the way the transaction occurs. And the fact is, over time, the number of site-bugs is going to grow in such a way people won't believe these quality problems can exist.

Here's the beauty of this ugly situation — site-bugs are going to lead to career opportunities!

Let me give you a perfect example of a site-bug. The other day, someone reported on an online bulletin board that a Web site known as AutoMallOnline (www.automallonline.com) had a rather peculiar problem. This particular Web site promises you a "smarter way to buy a car" by looking at the details behind new and used car prices. In order to try and attract more visitors, they had set things up so that if you joined, you'd get some "AutoMallOnline reward points." Not only that, but if you referred some friends to the site or did any other number of things, you'd earn more points.

Fair enough. Lots of sites try some type of reward structure to stand out in the crowd. But in this case, AutoMallOnline also announced they would now let you convert your reward points into Hilton HHonors points (something like frequent flyer miles.) All you had to do was select a menu item within AutoMallOnline, provide your Hilton HHonors account number and PIN, and the conversion would take place.

In real time. That is, as soon as you press, "confirm," your Hilton account would be updated. So in other words, AutoMallOnline wrote some nifty code on their Web server that accesses your Hilton account right away in order to provide you with the points.

The problem set in when someone noticed that if you happened to choose to transfer 500 points you'd get 36,000 points transferred into your Hilton HHonors account, instead of the 1,000 points you were supposed to get. This site-bug was created when someone screwed up in writing the code for the Web site transaction.

This was a wonderfully fun site-bug, given the massive "interconnect- edness" that exists online. Once I heard the problem, and being an aficionado of site-bugs, I decided to take part just to see how bad things can be. I travelled over to AutoMallOnline, signed up for a new account, and immediately received a "signing bonus." I then created a few referral e-mails to a variety of people, and received even more points. After I had a sufficient balance of AutoMallOnline points (which took all of three minutes), I decided to convert those points into my Hilton account to check out this site-bug.

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And it was true! Wham — in real-time — I could see my Hilton account go from 5,000 points, up to 113,000 points plus! But the fun didn't end there, because Hilton allows you to convert their points to airline frequent flyer programs. So I continued with the game, immediately deciding to convert all of my Hilton points over to my American Airlines AAdvantage account.

This was good for 24,000

AAdvantage miles, enough for a free economy-class ticket anywhere in North America.

Of course, this was early Monday morning, and by Monday afternoon, AutoMallOnline and Hilton had obviously discovered the site-bug, since they reversed the transaction. By then, my Hilton account had a negative balance of 113,000 miles, and I would imagine there were lots of red-faces all around. I fully expect that I'll never see any AAdvantage points out of this and everything will go back to normal.

But the moral of this story is a perfect example of the types of flaws that will occur as we march forward into the future of the Internet-transaction economy. The fact is, with the emergence of the Internet and e-commerce, we are busy linking together a number of different transaction systems in ways that have never been done before. And so while the entire history of information technology development and implementation is littered with programming flaws and errors, evidence is already emerging that we are simply going to see all kinds of quality problems continue to occur.

Folks, we're at the tip of the iceberg of the biggest IT disaster to have ever occurred, and that spells opportunity! Imagine what will happen one day when my bank account is linked to my brokerage account which is linked to my credit card account which is linked to my gasoline card which is linked to my offshore bank! Heck, in a matter of seconds, I'll be able to take advantage of some newly discovered site-bug to quickly transfer money out of the country.

Through the next decade, we are going to see an explosion in the number of site-bugs. That's why I have to laugh when I hear the folks at Microsoft expound on the wonders of their .NET strategy and marvel when other technology vendors talk about the ease of

implementation of their Internet business transaction systems. In the case of Microsoft, they plan to provide the tools that are going to lead to a massively connected transaction universe. This from the folks who seem to be intent on the ongoing release of software that features so many bugs that we marvel at its poor quality. They can't get Microsoft Outlook working bug free, and they are going to provide the tools that will power the global economy?

The fact of the matter is that .NET and other "visionary" systems are going to lead to a huge new opportunity for lousy code, an explosion in the number of site-bugs, and all kinds of opportunity to abscond funds. I'm amazed that people even buy into propaganda from Microsoft and other HiTech companies without even thinking this issue through.

Which leads to the career issue. Through the next few years, we are going to see a big increase in the need for software and system quality control experts. Every organization getting involved with online transaction systems is going to learn that they must check, double check and triple check each and every little bit of code that links together the various transaction systems that make up their supply-chain or business-system.

Otherwise, they're going to learn the hard way that their site-bugs let savvy and sophisticated Internet users abscond with their corporate assets before they even know it. Heck, Enron will look like a walk in the park compared to what site-bugs will do. «

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